SHRI B.J. PANDA: Sir, I thank the hon. Minister for the sanction of Rs. 55 crores for these projects at Cuttack and Puri. But I want to put something in perspective...

MR. CHAIRMAN: Please put your question.

SHRI B.J. PANDA: Sir, this is important information that I want to...

MR. CHAIRMAN: It may be important. But you should only put your question.

SHRI B.J. PANDA: Right, Sir. Sir, Orissa has 10 per cent of the national water resources and it is going to be an important State in the river-linkage project. And if the pollution in the river water is not corrected today, we will be exporting water pollution to the rest of the country. In view of this, Sir, will the hon. Minister agree to accord a higher priority to these projects?

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, I have already said that we are ready to accord a higher priority to these projects. Now, we have already sanctioned projects of Rs. 55.13 crores, whereas they have spent only Rs. 3.15 crores so far. What can I do?

Distribution of forest land among tribals

*188. SHRI ABANI ROY: Will the Minister of ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have agreed to grant forest land in various States for distribution among tribals;

(b) if so, the facts and details thereof?

(c) whether the forest land identified by State Governments for the purpose have been cleared by Government;

(d) if so, the details thereof; and

(e) the estimated percentage of forest cover which would be reduced as a result thereof?

THE MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI T.R. BAALU): (a) No, Sir.

(b) to (e) Do not arise.

SHRI ABANI ROY: Sir, in part (c) of my question, I had asked, "Whether the forest land identified by the State Governments for the purpose have been cleared by Government". The reply is, "Do not arise". I think the answer is not very clear. I want to know whether it has been cleared.

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, the State Government should apply for the change of forest land into revenue land, provided it is within the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

SHRI ABANI ROY: My second supplementary is this. All over India, tribals are fighting for their land. In the name of forest conservation, environmental protection and so on, they are being evicted from their land. I want to know whether the Government is thinking of amending the laws for helping the tribals.

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, whether they are tribals, the SCs and STs, or anybody else, if they have been staying there prior to 1980, and they have got the relevant documents to prove it, the Government is ready to consider their cases.

SHRIMATI SHABANA AZMI: Sir, the Ministry of Environment is not willing to recognise the rights of the tribals who have been living on forest land for centuries. But, is it true that the Maharashtra Government has cleared vast tracts of forest land to resettle the oustees of the Sardar Sarovar Project? And on what basis was this clearance given to the Maharashtra Government?

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, the Maharashtra Government, as also the Madhya Pradesh Government, had produced the relevant documents showing that those tribals, or, the SCs and STs had been staying there prior to 1980 and on that basis it had been cleared. That is all.

SHRI VAYALAR RAVI: Sir, these issues relating to forest land have created a social problem and a conflict in different parts of the country, starting from Kerala to Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and so on. I can name many States. The tribals are up in arms and have been agitating; they are asserting their right on

that land. Will the hon. Minister look into it and find out after discussion with different State Governments what kind of amendments are needed in the Forest Conservation Act and in what way these people can be compensated and will you please go in for a -comprehensive policy for settling the demands of the tribals?

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, if their demands meet the eligibility criteria, we are definitely there to consider their cases. So far as Kerala is concerned, Shri A.K. Anthony, the Chief Minister, had come and met me. We have discussed the matter. I have also sent some officers for an on-the-spot inspection there. If they meet the eligibility criteria, we will definitely consider their cases.

SHRI VAYALAR RAVI: Sir, ...

MR. CHAIRMAN: Next question *...(Interruptions)* ...I won't allow it *...(Interruptions)* ...No. Dr. Abrar Ahmed.

VRS in Railways

*189. DR. ABRAR AHMED:†
SHRI GAYA SINGH:

Will the Minister of RAILWAYS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Railways have announced any voluntary retirement scheme for its safety related front line staff; and

(b) if so, the details of the scheme?

THE MINISTER OF RAILWAYS (SHRI NITISH KUMAR): (a) and (b) A Statement is laid on the Table of the Sabha.

Statement

(a) Yes, Sir. Introduction of a voluntary retirement scheme for two categories *viz.* Drivers and Gangmen has been announced.

(b) The details are under formulation.

डा. अबरार अहमद : माननीय सभापति महोदय, मंत्री जी ने जो जवाब दिया है उसके अंदर 14 जुलाई के समाचार पत्र में मंत्री जी की घोषणा छपी हुई है, उसके अनुरूप कोई

†The question was actually asked on the floor of the House by Dr. Abrar Ahmed.